

May 5, 1966

Miss Hattie M. Gibbs
P. O. Box 3308
Lafayette, Louisiana 70501

Dear Miss Gibbs:

Your letter of April 20 raises a very interesting question.

So far as I know there is no scientific verification of parthenogenetic birth in man. Let me say that I see no absolutely compelling theoretical argument against the possibility, since parthenogenesis is already known in a number of other vertebrates. However, one must approach a question like this with a rigorous empirical attitude.

The report that you had in mind undoubtedly stems from an investigation that was initiated by Dr. Helen Spurway (the widow of the late Professor J. B. S. Haldane) during the middle 1950's in Britain. She pointed out that the recent discoveries in the genetic control of transplantability of skin and other tissues should make it possible to reach an unambiguous conclusion as to the reality of a claimed parthenogenetic birth. She therefore advertised quite widely for examples and received a surprisingly large number of returns, most of which, however, spoke for some confusion between parthenogenesis and illegitimacy. I have to quote from memory as to the outcome, but I did talk to Dr. Spurway about this during a visit to Calcutta about nine years ago, and as I recall, her search finally winnowed the list down to some two or three candidates which seemed reasonably credible from a psychological standpoint. However, these three examples were rejected on the basis of incompatibility of skin grafts or on other genetic evidence. As far as I know this has been the only large scale scientific effort to deal with this problem.

I am not sure whether Dr. Spurway ever published her investigation as a formal scientific report, although I suspect that she did do so somewhere. If so, you should have little difficulty in finding some reference to it by searching through the various indexes under her name. I do recall seeing some correspondence dealing with this question in print in one of the British newspapers, probably the Observer or the Manchester Guardian, and there may also have been some correspondence in the "New Scientist", another British publication. Even if your own library does not carry these materials, it should give you facilities for interlibrary loans or information searches in larger university libraries.

GIBBS, H.

Miss Hattie M. Gibbs

May 5, 1966
Page 2

Since Professor Haldane's death I am not exactly sure of Dr. Spurway's whereabouts, but it is very likely that you would be able to reach her by direct communication at her address most recently known to me: Dr. Helen Spurway, Genetics and Biometry Laboratory, Bhubaneswar-e, Orissa, India.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics